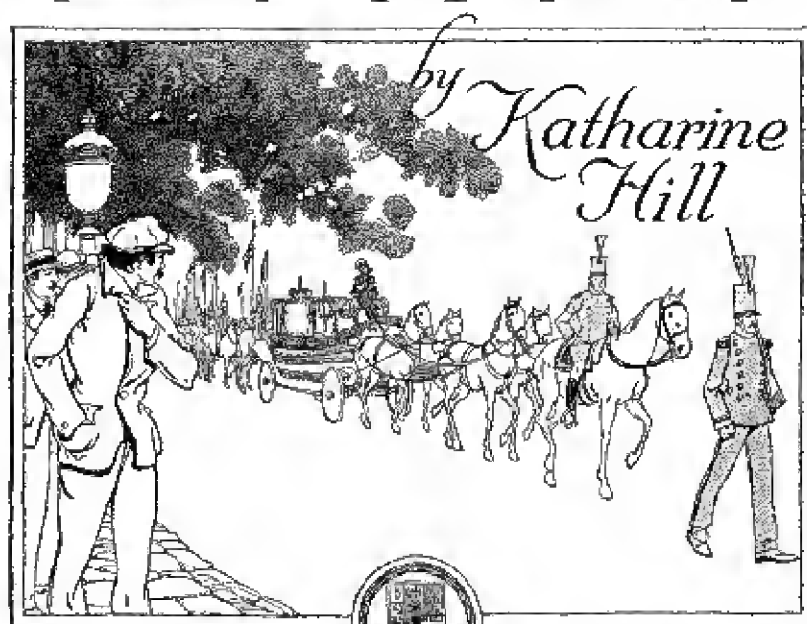


The Bomb



"WHEN you speak of this girl as your wife, it's merely a concession to convention, is it not? You didn't really submit her and yourself to the degrading ceremony of a marriage?"

Jaime reddened.

"She is truly my wife," he confessed, abashed.

"I see! It is only since then that you became one of us."

The two men sat in a corner of the long, bare room where presently the circle of anarchists to which they belonged would assemble for the meeting. It was natural enough that Jaime Isteve should be there so early, for the night was wet and stormy outside, and he was homeless except for the shelter of this hall, on whose bare benches a man so well trusted as Jaime could always claim the right to sleep.

But that Pedro Fuentes — the great Pedro, leader of the anarchists of Spain — Pedro, who had spent one-third of his adult life in prison, who had undergone

torture at Montjuich, whose steps were ever dogged by detectives, and whose lightest suggestion was sure to be eagerly carried out by the ardent hero-worshippers surrounding him—that Pedro should come early and unescorted to a meeting was unusual.

"No one here but you, Jaime?" he had exclaimed on entering. "Was not the meeting called for ten o'clock, then? And it is already half past."

"For eleven, comrade," Jaime said, his thin, sensitive face lighting with proud pleasure at the prospect of spending half an hour at least alone with the great man. There would be something to boast of, if he ever got back to Seville!

"As Fuentes said to me one night in Barcelona—

"Fuentes disapproves those tactics. Oh, he doesn't say so on the platform, but he told me—"

How casually he would let fall such sentences, big with the greatest name he knew, and how the radicals of his acquaintance in Seville, discontented men

and women who were merely on the fringe of the movement, would stare at him and envy him!

And indeed Fuentes seemed genially disposed enough. Sprawling his huge limbs along the bench beside Jaime, he took out tobacco and papers and offered both to the younger man. Then, when they had lit the cigarettes which both made with Spanish deftness and rapidity, he began to draw from Jaime, very sympathetically, the familiar details of his life.

"You married the girl, you say?"

"I did, comrade, and it was after I became an anarchist, too. What would you have? I was young." The boy reddened at Fuentes's quizzical look, and added in self-defense: "I am six years older now, and, I hope, should know better how to impose my will upon a woman! I was in love, and Mercedes was a devout Catholic. I had to have her, and there was but the one way to get her, so I took that way. For a while we were very happy."

Jaime's dark face grew darker, and Pedro moved closer and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Then—poverty, was it not?" he asked, the flexible, emotional voice with which he swayed crowds silky with sympathy.

The boy nodded.

"I had been concerned in a May-day riot. I was not arrested, but I was one of those who were marked and followed. When the police came to my employer with questions about me, he was frightened, and discharged me. And then it was the same story over again. If I got work for a few days, always by the third or fourth it would become known that I was an anarchist and a dangerous character, and I would lose it again. There was the child, too, and money was needed. It was not because I didn't care that I left Mercedes; but when the neighbors brought in food, when she found sewing to do and was paid for it, when her mother sent a little money, then I was

the third mouth and the biggest to eat up what would have lasted a woman and baby alone twice as long. I brought in nothing, and so it went for months. When I left, I hoped soon to send for her. In Barcelona, I had heard, half the people are anarchists, and it cannot be made a reason for refusing a man work that he has a head and thinks for himself with it! Well, I have been here now ten months, finding no work, living as you can guess, and the time when I was the least hungry was the month I spent in prison!"

He spoke out all the bitterness in him, secure of understanding. He had forgotten how famous a man was his companion, his sense of privilege in speaking with Fuentes swallowed up in the sense that here was a great heart, beating and bleeding always for just such sufferings as his own.

"Have you eaten to-day, brother?" asked Pedro quickly, and as Jaime shook his head he thrust a peseta into the boy's hand. "After the meeting, go and buy food."

Jaime nodded his thanks.

"Happiness with a woman," Fuentes went on; "a little home where you can forget the sufferings of your class, children whom you can afford to feed and warm—all that is sweet! I knew it once. Then, one day, there was a procession of reds, to which we went, my girl and I, like children, to watch what to us was a show and no more. There was a riot and shooting. Rosita was killed by a bullet, and I attacked the soldier who had shot her. I was arrested, tried, and convicted. I served five years in prison, in company with others who could give a reason for being on the plaza that day. When I came out, I was never able to find my children, but I know, of course, where they are—in some institution of charity, taught by monks and nuns, their minds filled with the poison of Christian doctrine and submission, crossing themselves at the name of Pedro Fuentes as at that of the devil!

"But, comrade, mark this. While I was happy, I was an artisan of Barcelona, a submissive slave to my master, my strength and energy given to piling up more wealth for that man, already rich. I came out of prison Pedro Fuentes, at whose name he and those like him tremble! Domestic happiness is the greatest enemy of the revolution. Till a man has lost or forsworn it, I hold him no serviceable tool, and I would never trust him with a secret or important mission. You, Jaime, have learned that security in happiness can never be the lot of the poor man, yet the memory of your Mercedes stays with you and hinders entanglements with the girls of Barcelona. It was because I never saw you with a woman, never heard of you with a woman, that I have thought of you for a certain mission—a certain undertaking, which is to be discussed to-night."

Jaime's heart stopped beating, then began again at a mad pace, as if to make up the time lost.

"Me—for a mission?"

His eyes brightened, his lips parted in a grin—a grin that was partly nervousness, partly gratified vanity at being chosen for an undertaking which clearly, from Pedro's manner, was of the first importance.

"You understand, do you not?" said Fuentes sharply. "It means danger. What do I say? It means death, in every probability! Are you afraid to die for the cause?"

"Oh, try me!" pleaded Jaime, his voice thick and guttural with eagerness. "Only try me!"

His eyes shone now with the mad light of self-devotion, and Fuentes, who had kindled that light often, and knew it well, was satisfied.

II

YET Jaime blanched for a moment, a little later, when it was disclosed to him what he was chosen to do. The anarchists had assembled tardily, and the meeting opened and proceeded without much

spirit until, near midnight, Fuentes took the floor.

"Comrades," he said, "for months we have skulked in inaction. The world has forgotten that there are anarchists in Spain. The hearts of the people beat sluggishly, lacking the stimulus of some great deed, such as we have sworn to give them. The contemptible imbecile who sits upon the throne at Madrid should die. We are all agreed as to that—applause would burst from all our bosoms for the man or woman who should succeed in killing him. But how often have we attempted his life! How often has some young anarchist dreamed this noble dream of ridding Spain of the tyrant, gone out ready to give his life to that end, and, alas, given his life indeed, while some enchantment has seemed to guard the royal miscreant! It is scarcely possible that an anarchist should be superstitious, but I tell you that it has come to a point where I hesitate—yes, Pedro Fuentes hesitates—to urge on a daring youth to attempt the glorious deed of regicide."

The speaker's tones had been clear and thrilling, but here his voice sank to a lower note.

"Comrades, last night I had an inspiration. The viper has a son—a boy of eighteen months."

Fuentes paused. Jaime knew what was coming next. The roots of his hair prickled, and a sudden sweat broke out upon his face. To kill a child—ah, he had not bargained for that! A baby boy of the age of his own Josito!

A dark wave of horror swept over him. His ears rang, and he did not hear the orator's next words. When at last he wiped his brow, and his scattered senses began to come back to him, Fuentes was saying:

"Some of you may shrink from such an act, because in us anarchists love for that which is pure and innocent is our strongest feeling, although its reverse side—our implacable hatred for cruelty and oppression—is better known to the

world. You would revenge yourselves on the father, you would spare the child? You are wrong. The child dies instantaneously, almost painlessly, before it has had the opportunity to stain itself with the blood of the people. And how, my comrades, can we better strike at these tyrants who rule us than through the one likeness to humanity that remains to them—their love for their children? Here, here is terrorism, here is the way at last to safeguard the future, which alone is ours. Let us kill the serpent's brood, my brothers! Let us stamp out the young and vigorous who come swarming up the thrones of the world, the better to use their strength and their vigor for our oppression!"

The orator sank back, and Jaime cast at him a burning look. He was convinced, as always, by Fuentes's logic, swept away by his eloquence. So was the whole gathering, and the leader's motion was carried by acclaim.

Turning to Jaime, Fuentes asked in a low tone:

"Now that you know what it is that is demanded of you, are you still unshrinking?"

"I am the tool that will not break in your hands," the boy answered earnestly, with a touch of Fuentes's own fervid imagery.

The next moment the anarchist leader was on his feet again, appointing Jaime Isteve as the instrument to execute the will of the circle, and calling for a money appropriation to cover his traveling-expenses to Seville and to purchase the materials with which to construct the bomb.

III

It was broad noonday, and the sun beat down cruelly from almost the zenith of a sky out of which it had scorched the blue. It beat upon Jaime Isteve's sleek black head, where the brain seethed already with excitement and nervous tension. It beat upon his shoulders, which wriggled under his shabby coat in a vain

attempt to escape the torment. It beat upon the holiday crowd about him, thronging the streets of Seville to see the great procession whose martial music was already, in fitful snatches, borne on the air before it.

Jaime had been standing at his vantage-point against the ropes since early morning that he might be sure of a position close enough to the carriages to admit of no error in his aim. His choice of so conspicuous a spot made his own death practically certain. Even if the bomb did not kill him, he would be seen of all, and would have no chance of getting away through the packed crowd behind him to safety.

No matter! He was resolved that his attempt should not be another fiasco, like so many anarchist attempts, when maimed horses and splintered carriage-wheels had been the only result.

The music came nearer, and the tramp of horses' feet was heard. Jaime stood untrembling, that which he held in his right hand concealed between his handkerchief and the firmly planted leg which shielded it against premature jostling. Fortunately, as he grimly reflected, it could not be ignited by heat, or he and all those around him had been blown piecemeal long since.

As the vanguard of the procession drew abreast of him—the grand marshal, the high-stepping horses, the deafening band—a strong tremor ran through him. For a moment he was half-blinded by nervousness, and his heart beat tumultuously. Then his sight cleared, and he looked steadily before him again.

Soldiers, of course, and soldiers and more soldiers—brilliant uniforms, more bands. Then, yes—the high-plumed horses of the royal carriage. Jaime stared curiously at the king's ugly, oddly charming face, and at the pink-and-white fairness of the queen. His fingers tightened on the small, round thing between them that could deal a dozen deaths.

More horses, more dignitaries in laced coats, escorting the second carriage. This

second carriage, Jaime knew, was to contain the king's young son, a child of eighteen months, for whom primarily—though it must destroy many others—the bomb was intended.

Steeling his breast with Fuentes's words of justification, he turned his eyes slowly where all other eyes were now turned—toward the carriage and its occupants, who would be, at the crucial moment, barely a dozen feet away from him. The muscles rippled on his arms preparatory to a lightning cast, which must be too quick for watching eyes to follow and ready hands to frustrate.

The carriage was drawing nearer now. The engaging baby face, a mere pink blur before, grew clearer. Round, soft cheeks, wide eyes, pursed baby mouth, little waving hands. *Josito!* The thought of his own child, unseen for nearly a year, of like age with the king's, came to Jaime with inhibitory vividness and poignancy.

"The thought of your own child will nerve you," Fuentes had said. "Your child, dead perhaps by now of starvation, that the children of the oppressors may be decked out in richer lace—"

But Jaime could only think of the little cooings and gurglings that the tiny Josito had made when his father snatched him from the cradle and held the small, fair face close against his own, and of the passion of tenderness that had flooded his heart as he did so.

For a moment a traitorous misgiving flickered through him, as his mind flashed back to the man in the first carriage. The king—did the king feel like that when he held his baby in his arms? Of course not! The king was a monster, as was well known. He deserved death unquestionably; but to dissever with hideous violence the soft limbs of a child, to shock and frighten it, even, or injure it in any way—that, Jaime knew with a sad heart as the carriage, unharmed, moved slowly past him, it was not in him to do. It might be well that the serpent's brood should die, but his was not the hand that could kill them!

He had overrated his own heroism—or villainy. He had betrayed the trust of Fuentes; he would rightly be the mock and scorn of all the anarchists who had known of the plot. He was a poor, spineless slave who had not even the nerve to kill where his mind acknowledged that death should be dealt, when the means, the opportunity, were his in perfection!

Self-contempt scorched him, shriveled him. He had become in his own eyes the meanest, the most pitiful of figures.

The carriage containing the baby was far away now, soldiers were tramping before him. He turned to set himself to the task of worming through the mass of people closely wedged about him.

One feeling, and one only, had survived the annihilating blast of his own scorn for himself. Josito, his own little son, whose image had been brought so vividly before him by the sight of that other child, was, if indeed he were still living, somewhere in Seville, and Mercedes—poor, pretty Mercedes—was with him. Jaime would see his son again, would kiss Mercedes again. She would be glad to see him, she had not wanted him to go. What he would do afterward, he knew not.

But, first, the bomb must be got rid of. He went a long way into the country with it, found deep water, and dropped it in. There was a muffled sound, a commotion of the water, then stillness.

Weary already almost to exhaustion, Jaime rose from the ground where he had flung down, and addressed himself to the long walk back into the city.

IV

How familiar the shabby little court looked in the slanting rays of the low sun! Jaime Istve could almost have believed that he had never been away, that everything was as it had been a year ago, when he and Mercedes and Josito had lived together in the one little room above there.

He had little hope that he would find his wife there now. She would have been

forced by poverty to move away, most probably, though Heaven knew what place cheaper than this one she could find. Perhaps the neighbors could tell him where she was.

He went up the black, crooked stairs, his mouth dry, his heart aching with the old memories that the familiar lights and smells of the house brought to him.

What sound was that? The laughter of Mercedes, gay, triumphant, girlish, in peal on peal; and between, a sound that was unmistakably the sound of kisses!

Jaime could conceive of but one explanation for this—that Mercedes had taken a lover. His Spanish blood flamed. He forgot his fatigue, his diffidence, and his self-scorn; he had no thought but to punish the two who had betrayed him.

He was up the remaining steps in a series of bounds, and violently flung open the door of their old room, whence the sounds had come.

There was no man there, only Mercedes with little Josito in her arms. For a flashing instant, as he entered, he saw her cheeks red with happiness, her mouth still widened with laughter; but at the sudden sight of him the color drained away, and she was startled into a statue of surprise.

"Jaime!" she screamed, as soon as she found voice. "Holy Virgin, this is too much happiness!"

She rushed into her husband's arms.

For a time the feel of her soft, firm-clinging body and of the baby's round contours, both again in the circle of his arms, was enough for Jaime, and he thrilled to it with closed eyes; but presently he opened them, and they went marveling about the room.

The broken-legged table was covered with good things to eat and drink—milk and wine and white bread, fruit and chocolate, and a bundle wrapped in paper through which, in spots, blood had oozed; that would be a kingly roast of meat! Some handsome clothes, quite new, lay over a chair, and on the edge of the table lay four, five, six—there must have been

ten or more, in all—broad pieces of gold, and a little heap of silver beside them.

Jaime drew Josito out of his wife's arms and held him off for a good, long look. With surprise and a kind of dread, he perceived a likeness.

"Why—why, he's just like the king's little son!" he said, stunned with the wonder of it.

"Aha! My little king that I made!" cried Mercedes, snatching the child to her again. "He is like the king's son, indeed! That is why we have new clothes, and more food than we can eat, and money, besides, to last us for months! Listen, and I will tell you. The king's son was to ride in the procession to-day, but the queen, she was afraid for him. Herself, she would go in the carriage with the king, to be killed if he were killed—for the police, do you see, had received warning of an anarchist plot—but the child she would not expose. At eighteen months, especially when half-smothered in lace, all babies look alike; and besides, our Josito, it appears, really resembles the little prince. The sisters spoke for me to a lady of the court, who arranged all. Why do you look so white, Jaime? It was a risk, yes, for there are anarchists cruel enough to murder a child; but which is better, to die quickly by a bomb or slowly by starvation?"

Jaime had fallen back against the door, his mouth opening and shutting without achieving speech, his fingers clutching at the neck of his shirt.

"Do not take it so, Jaime! You see, he came home safe. And, what is best of all, we may have the same opportunity again. Whenever there is a procession in Spain, wherever the little prince has to appear in public—"

But Jaime's long, lean hand had darted forward, to close on her wrist with desperate tension.

"Never again!" he choked. "Never again such a risk for Josito! I will find work—no matter how, I will find it! Woman, you do not know how close to death the child may have been to-day!"